

## INTERESTING GROUPS SHOWING THE NATIVITY



THE FAMOUS PRESEPIO OF SAMMARTINO, POLIDORO AND OTHERS.

### Christmas Crib Made by Peasants, Artisans or Artists in Past Centuries Now Sought by Collectors—Elaborate Representations of Events Connected With the Birth of Christ Executed With Infinite Skill

**A**MONG the most interesting of the customs connected with the celebration of the Christmas festival a prominent place must be assigned to the exhibition of cribs. The groups of figures representing the Nativity, the adoration of the infant Jesus by the Wise Men of the East, the Herodian massacre of the innocents and other scenes and incidents connected with the birth of Christ are popularly designated. In Catholic countries of Europe peasants and artisans worked for months prior to the Christmas season in their spare time at the fashioning of the figures, structures and surroundings for the Christmas gr ups, while famous artists have not considered it beneath their dignity to devote time to the designing and execution of these groups, which are often of a very pretentious and artistic character. Specimens of this work have found a place in many of the older art collections.

The most familiar form of crib is that in which the infant Jesus is shown reposing in a manger in a more or less humble structure, in many instances attended by angels and adored by the wise men or the shepherds of Bethlehem. Such objects as are commonly to be found about barnyards and stables—cattle, sheep, poultry, etc., farm implements, vehicles and produce are introduced to lend a degree of reality to the scene, and in the more artistic groups these are fashioned to conform to the period represented. In many instances, when the construction of the crib has been the work of or supervised by an artist of renown, the fidelity to nature and tradition and beauty of execution of these things are exceedingly interesting to the art student and connoisseur.

For years the crib was neglected or overlooked by those who have interested themselves in the difficult fields of artistic effort; it was regarded as little more than a plaything, something wherewith to entertain the children and at the same time convey in kindergarten style an object lesson in the story of Christianity. Of late, however, a change in this respect is to be noted; the more artistic of these pieces have been rescued from oblivion and accorded the place they deserve among art objects, and in some museums a special classification with its own apartment has been accorded these evidences of the skill and religious fervor of the past. In this manner too they have become available as models for the artists who prepare similar groups for church use and for installation in the homes of the devout at the present time.

Especially has this been the case in Munich, Bavaria, where Commercial Councillor Max Schneiderer has presented to the Royal National Museum in that city an exceedingly valuable collection of crib groups, for which special accommodations covering more than 1,000 square yards have been provided in that institution and which has gained widespread fame.

From those that are regarded as par-

ticularly worthy of distinction and display there and elsewhere the best and most original of these groups have been selected for illustration and description here. It is necessary to preface the description with the statement that a careful study of each group will enable the artist to determine the period to which it belongs, the grouping, costuming, etc., being in every case characteristic. In the pose, the expression of the figures in the better cribs a high degree of naturalness is preserved, so that in the larger ones especially it is easy to distinguish the particular emotion with which each figure is animated.

Take for instance the famous crib from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, by Sammartino, Polidoro and others at the museum of San Martino, Naples, one of the finest in existence. The entire picture is replete with active life. The Neapolitan costumes, characterized by some writers as incongruous in view of the fact that they represent a period centuries later than the event referred to, are explained by the desire of the artist to impart to his work an international significance, as revealed by the fact that the characters participating are assembled from all quarters.

Another very artistically conceived crib is in the Neapolitan section of the Munich

collection. The Virgin sits on the steps leading to the ruins of an ancient classical edifice, the three kings from the East being represented as presenting their offerings. The background lends notable dignity to this group, while the accessory figures and objects are especially interesting.

Somewhat similar in its selection of a ruined structure for a background is another crib from the Munich collection. The Holy Family occupies an elevated position in the group surrounded by the adoring kings and magi, whose retinue constitutes an interesting group in the right foreground. Particular pains have been taken by the artist in this instance to impart an Oriental character to the scene, in which palms and other semi-tropical

growths are conspicuous.

In a Tyrolean crib the makeshift character of the accommodations at the place of the Saviour's birth is in full evidence. The costumes of the adoring shepherds also display a desire to attain a higher degree of realism than many of these groups display.

Notably dramatic is a group in the Sicilian division of the Munich collection, depicting the massacre of the innocents conducted under the order of Herod. The savagery of the soldiers and the appealing agony of the mothers are shown in this group, which always attracts.

Most of the groups shown in the Schneiderer collection date from the period of the counter revolution, when the Church sought, by the splendor of its services, the magnificence of its surroundings and

the cultivation in buildings and accessories of Renaissance art, to counteract the influence of the Reformation. By some authorities the earliest crib groups are attributed to Luca della Robbia, the artist in clay, who discovered the processes of coloring and glazing terra cotta that have won for him immortal fame. That his processes would lend themselves peculiarly to the reproduction of the figures, animals, etc., so conspicuous in the crib group work may readily be understood, and it is not at all unlikely that some of his pupils turned to account in this direction the artistic knowledge he imparted.

With his familiarity with the nature and use of color, combined with their skill in the shaping and arrangement of the

figures, it is easy to see where the perfection of grouping, posing, etc., the cribs display was obtained. That the process of development was along lines very similar to those followed in the porcelain industry can readily be realized.

A close examination of any one of the more elaborate cribs will impress the observer with the fact that an infinite amount of patience and skill was called for in imparting the proper pose to the innumerable little figures, so that they would naturally simulate the action represented. Whether ascending or descending stairs, climbing or mounted on rocks, perched on balustrades, peeping from doors and windows, they are alike natural. The surroundings are marvellously true to detail. Every class of building is shown, daily occupations are in full progress, the idea being to exemplify how Christ comes to the people.

From the historical standpoint, these cribs are notably interesting and valuable, and their careful study will prove an aid to the student of history, especially the history of the people, showing, as they do, the habits and customs of the period of their origin with absolute fidelity. The costumes of the figures are equally worthy of observation.

That much importance was attached to these groups in the past is demonstrated by the number of cribs and parts of cribs preserved in public and private collections. In the Cluny Museum at Paris are two Neapolitan house cribs of Spanish origin (Audouin collection), the smaller of which was made for a Spanish prince. Other notable cribs are in the San Martino Museum at Naples and the Riedinger collection in Augsburg. The Schneiderer collection, which had occupied the attention of the owner for more than ten years, was presented to the Munich museum in 1892 and he has since added materially to it every year by purchases made in Naples and Sicily.

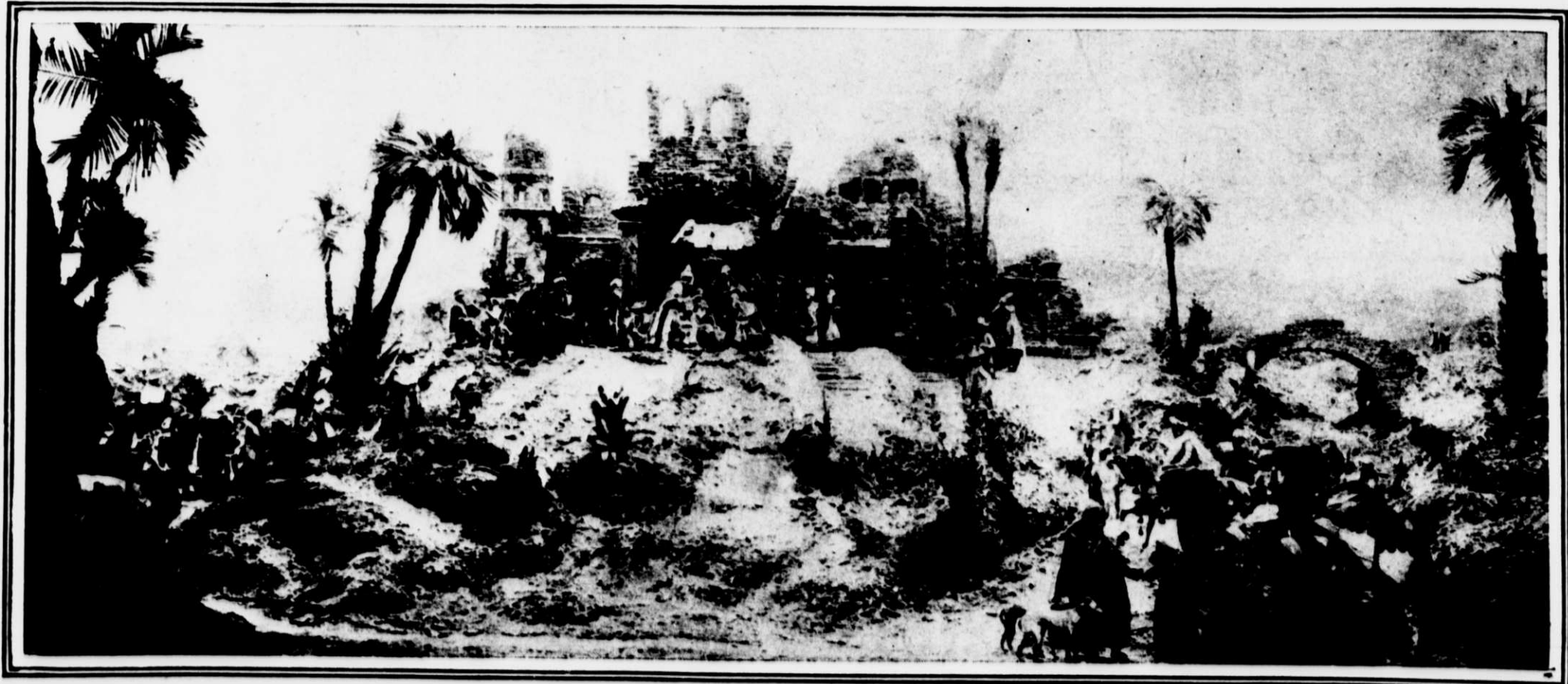
Outside of Italy the crib has attained its greatest perfection and widest popularity in Bavaria and in the Tyrol. In the Tyrolean cribs the detail is exceptionally painstaking and the entire surroundings of the Nativity scene are designed to emphasize the fact that while it was an epoch making event it took place among the scenes of ordinary life and belonged essentially to mankind. One of these Tyrolean cribs, in the museum for Austrian folk study in Vienna, contains no less than 256 human and 154 animal figures, while the number of buildings shown amounts to twenty-four.

In addition to the Nativity scene, however, other events connected with the earthly mission of the Saviour are depicted in a similar manner by means of figures and appropriate surroundings. Among these may be mentioned the announcement of the Saviour's birth to the shepherds, the flight into Egypt, the murder of the innocents, the twelve-year-old Jesus arguing with the doctors in the temple, the wedding at Cana in Galilee, etc. The crib is thus in a measure connected with the old time miracle play that played an important part in ecclesiastical teachings.

**A PERMANENT FIRE LINE**  
There is one fire line in the city that is perpetual. It is located in Thirty-third street, west of Sixth avenue. This fire line is not established to keep back spectators, but is used to mark off a certain stretch of ground on which wagon traffic must not trespass.

Half a dozen houses west of Sixth avenue on the north side of the street is a double firehouse. In the house are stationed two hook and ladder trucks and a searchlight engine. Across the way from the firehouse is the delivery entrance of a large dry goods establishment. Night and day there are always long lines of delivery wagons backed against the curb. Unless the Fire Department took some means to leave a cleared path for the apparatus it would be impossible for the long hook and ladder trucks to get out of the firehouse when an alarm "hit in." The wagon traffic congregated on the other side of the street would prevent them.

The department realizing this has marked over a stretch of ground about thirty feet on each side of the firehouse. In order to keep drivers informed small red signs have been posted on the other side of the street reading "Fire Lines."



BAVARIAN CRIB.